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Supervising Practice Based Research

Geof Hill

Abstract

Practice based research appears to have emerged within several Higher Education agendas including the professional doctorates and the teacher as researcher. One way of thinking about this methodological approach is to consider its research paradigm – a practice based epistemology, and from this perspective to consider what special application to research supervision the paradigm invites. Within a “supervision as pedagogy” agenda these applications can be considered as pedagogies.

This paper has been written in the style of practice based research, drawing on the author’s own experiences of supervising students undertaking practice based research. It adopts a position that research supervision is pedagogy and draws on the model of ‘Productive Pedagogies’ to articulate strategies to help novice research students develop a research proposal.

Introduction

Practice Based Research is

“finding out why and what we currently do when we ‘work’. The ‘work’ which we examine in practice based research can be our own or others’ work; income-earning or non income-earning work; professional or domestic work.”

Hill (2006).

This paper itself is written in the style of practice based research drawing on my own experiences of supervising students undertaking practice based research.

Practice Based Research

Practice based research is not new, although the name may be newly coined. In my own work as a Work Study analyst in the 1970’s, I used ergonomic measurement and workload estimates to calculate required person hours to undertake packages of clerical work. I now recognise that as (albeit positivist) practice based research. At that time unions were also undertaking what can now be understood as practice based research, documenting and tabulating working conditions in industry to ensure that there were appropriate working conditions for their members. Both can be seen as early examples of practice based research. In recent years within the teacher as researcher literature there have been descriptions of ‘practitioner research’ (Stenhouse, 1981; McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead, 1996; Anderson and Herr, 1999) which encourage teachers to improve their teaching and administration by undertaking research on it themselves. Some of the Australian literature uses the term ‘practitioner research’ particularly with regard to the emerging professional doctorates (Brennan, 1998). This also signifies a shift in practice based research from ‘other’ study to ‘self’ study.

The resurgence of practitioner research can be contextualised within a larger agenda of the paradigm debate. This debate drew on the construct of paradigm coined by Kuhn (1962) and applied it to research practice to generate discussion about research paradigms and research practice. Several theorists (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Reason, 1994; Toma, 1997,1999) have described the research paradigm as beliefs about

- Truth (ontology)
- Knowledge (Epistemology)
- Approaches to investigation (Methodology)

From this perspective, Practice Based Research can be described as being based on an epistemological belief that knowledge arises from practice or experience. McNiff (2000) uses these assumptions to underpin her description of living action research, describing it as a form of practice based research.

Clandinin (1986, pp 3-4) has provided some substance to what might be intended by a practice based epistemology with regards to teachers investigating their teaching practice “If a teacher is acknowledged as having an active autonomous role in the classroom, and if we acknowledge the existence of experiential knowledge, the importance we attribute to understanding her past experience is enhanced. Further the existence of teacher knowledge that is practical, experiential and shaped by a teacher's purposes and values is acknowledged.”

This can be generalised beyond teachers by changing ‘teacher’ to ‘practitioner’ and ‘classroom’ to ‘workplace’.

Despite drawing its contemporary applications from the practice of teaching, practice based research can apply to any professional practice and is itself a hallmark of professionalism.

A practice based epistemology and background knowledge

Beliefs give rise to different attitudes and I would suggest that a practice epistemology generates attitudes about the students who undertake practice based research that:

1. These students come to university based research (usually) with a lot of practical knowledge about their own practice – they know what they do.
2. These students (sometimes) come to university based research with knowledge of the way investigations are undertaken in their work practice.

Such attitudes encourage recognition of possible knowledge that research students bring to the graduate research experience. Within pedagogy literature this is referred to as “Background knowledge”, and is one of a number of strategies within the productive pedagogy framework. Productive Pedagogies is a perspective on quality teaching which arose out of the School Reform Longitudinal Survey (QSRLS) (Education Queensland, 2001), undertaken by University of Queensland for Education Queensland in 2001. The QSRLS study replicated and used instruments from the University of Wisconsin’s Centre on the Organization of Restructuring of Schools (CORS) (Newmann and Wehlage, 1993; Newmann and Associates, 1996). CORS focused on how changes in school organisational capacity enabled changes in authentic pedagogy and improvements in student outcomes.

QSRLS identified twenty productive pedagogies that it believed would improve the quality of curriculum and organised them around four groups of pedagogies:

- Recognition of Difference- recognising and including multiple ways of knowing.
- Connectedness – Linking learning to a wider world.
- Intellectual Quality- Making the learner experience more intellectual demands.
- Supportive Classroom Environment – Expecting students to be responsible for their own learning and expecting high standards.

Background Knowledge is one of the pedagogies within Connectedness and advocates that teachers provide explicit links with student's prior experience. This may include community knowledge, local knowledge, personal experience, media and popular culture sources.

Graduate education literature, while not as robust as the primary, secondary and early childhood education disciplines with regard to pedagogy, does encourage the proposition that research supervision is pedagogy (Connell, 1985; Parry and Hayden, 1994; Manatunga, 2002; Pearson and Brew, 2002). By embracing the productive pedagogy framework it can then be suggested that one such graduate pedagogy is Background Knowledge and that this describes a viable research supervision strategy – to find out the knowledge that a research student brings into their doctoral investigation.

Background knowledge as (research) supervision pedagogy

In my own work supervising students undertaking practice based research for doctoral investigations I flesh out the pedagogy of Background Knowledge by asking three questions:

- What do you know about your practice?
- What do you know about investigative practice?
- What do you know about university based investigation and academic writing?

These questions are asked in my initial meeting with a student to start a short term process leading to production of a research proposal and a long term process of their doctoral candidature. The questions are underpinned by the assumption that students have answers to these questions and just need prompting to begin to affirm the knowledge that has already started to formulate their investigation. A contrasting and perhaps traditional strategy might be to encourage the student to look to literature to contextualize their investigative topic.

Background knowledge as a pedagogy affirms their self knowledge and focuses on marshalling and clarifying that knowledge into a research proposal.

The initial meeting is the first step in a model that includes six face-to-face meetings and five writing assignments over a period of (usually) six months (see appendix). In my own

candidature (albeit undertaken as a part time student) the research proposal was achieved after three semesters (eighteen months). My approach to supervising a research student's writing is driven by what appears in my students to be a desire to get to the 'fun' bit of doing the research as quickly as possible and is reinforced by institutional agendas for speedy completions.

My own experience of being supervised and the early supervision iterations

Despite having good research supervision, I came out of my doctoral candidature asking myself 'Could the academic writing process have been improved?' I began addressing this question with a fellow candidate who started two years after me as I became her 'critical friend'. Subsequently I pursued the question with another doctoral candidate to whom I was appointed associate supervisor after the student has spent some wasteful months not reaching the requirement of a research proposal.

While both experiences were helpful in establishing a way of helping students to write, neither operated from the basis of a novice student.

Current practice

With the current practice based research I am working with a novice student.

In our first meeting I initiated discussion about

- What the student understood as research (investigation) and university based research (investigation).
- What the student was interested in investigating and what they currently know about the topic. I also explored with them their breadth of knowledge about their topic and what they knew might be already published.

Following this meeting I sent the student a copy of my reflections from the meeting. In these notes I reframed what the student had said into the language of university based research.

- *Where the student had described ways in which he (she) has been undertaking research in their industry I documented this knowledge as their "investigative practice".*
- *Where the student described what they knew about their topic I documented this as their knowledge about "professional practice".*

Both acts of reframing were designed to focus the student on the research culture adage that research makes contributions to knowledge so a viable starting point was identifying what was known and what they knew.

In this model I also insist that a student starts writing immediately. As Richardson (1994) points out, research and the production of knowledge are ‘profoundly textual’.

Following the initial meeting I assign a writing task requiring the student to address the following questions:

- ☐ What do you intend to investigate?
- ☐ What is the context of the investigation?
 - Practice based context and
 - Literature context And
- ☐ What role do you play in the practice based context?
- ☐ Why is it important to investigate this issue?
- ☐ First thoughts on how you think you might investigate this topic.

This writing exercise is limited to two pages to avoid excessive discussion before they are clear what they are investigating.

I receive the student’s first writing after two or three weeks and provide extensive feedback ahead of our second meeting. I use the comment (Word) function to intersperse my comments within the text. Feedback on writing is itself an higher education pedagogy which I have addressed elsewhere (Hill, 2007). The cycle of discussion, writing and feedback generates a new set of discussion points for the next meeting.

Following the second meeting the student then builds their two page document into a four page document which again receives feedback, and generates the agenda for the next meeting. In our subsequent meetings we discuss the developing text and also address a number of issues that are pertinent to writing about and undertaking practice based research, such as ethics (see appendix). After five meetings the student has written a document of about 32 pages. This is often the size specification for a research proposal. In this working document they have positioned their own proposed investigation within a summary of what is ‘known’ about the topic (a literature review) and suggested how they might go about investigating this topic (methodology). This supervision process is focused on producing a research proposal. All of the writing tasks are intended to scaffold the student’s development of a research proposal.

The process is not solely practice affirming. With my current student whose investigative background is more quantitative, he has been exposed to some of the literature about research paradigms and the paradigm debate and has shifted his preferred investigative stance to one which is more aligned with a post positivist approach. As he has ventured into discovery of action research we have also talked about his self and situational reconnaissance (Author, 2008) and the workplace history that has preceded the current practice based research.

Conclusion

There are a wide range of models of supervision. Some provide insight into the relational structure of research supervision. This model is designed to provide scaffolding for the student's emergent academic writing.

As with any model, it is not intended as a prescriptive process, nor as a fail proof sequence. It is designed to provide some substance to the position that research supervision is pedagogy and poses possibilities for what that pedagogy might entail.

Background knowledge is presented as one of a number of pedagogies that can be applied to the supervisory relationship.

Appendix 1

Model of Supervising the writing of a research proposal

1. Session 1

1. In two or three sentences tell me what your investigation is about.
2. What do you currently know about your topic?
3. Have you had any thoughts about the way in which you intend to investigate the topic?

First Writing task

In no more than two pages elaborate on what you have told me by answering the following questions:

1. What do you intend to investigate?
2. What is the context of the investigation? And
3. What role do you play in the context?
4. Why is it important to investigate this issue?
5. How will you investigate it?

I read your writing and make comments ahead of our second meeting

2. Session 2

We discuss your first writing task.

Second writing task

Turn the two page document to a four page document

1. Add whatever references (particularly those for the definitions) that you have already found.
2. Start using Endnote.
3. Make the end point of the argument that frames the issue explicitly become a starting point for arguing for a methodology.

I read your writing and make comments ahead of our third meeting

3. Session 3

We discuss your second writing task

Third writing task

Turn the four page document to an eight page document

1. Add whatever direct quotes you have found and a bibliography of references at the end of the article.
2. Make explicit the debates in the literature and position your standing within these debates

I read your writing and make comments ahead of our fourth meeting

4. Session 4

We discuss your third writing task

Fourth writing task

Turn the eight page document to a sixteen page document

1. Make explicit statements about knowledge with regard to this particular issue (Epistemology)
2. Make explicit statements about truth with regard to your investigative practice (Ontology)

I read your writing and make comments ahead of our fifth meeting

5. Session 5

We discuss your fourth writing task

Fifth Writing task

Turn the sixteen page document to a thirty two page research proposal.

1. A research question.
2. The question's context within relevant literature
3. A bibliography of relevant literature
4. The importance of the question
5. How the investigation will be undertaken.
6. progress made to date
7. a timetable for completing the research.

I read your writing and make comments ahead of our sixth meeting

6. Session 6

We discuss the overall research proposal and examine the university benchmarks for having the research proposal accepted.

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